

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was nearly noon as Eileen, umbrella held close above her head, walked up the short, steep, hill to the police station. It was strange, approaching and entering what she could only view as enemy territory, and she was, in a perverse way, excited by the thought of it. This was what Sandra had to go through every working day. At Eileen's suggestion they lunched at a small restaurant that had squeezed itself between a chemist's shop and an iron-monger's near the bottom of the High Street. "I am really surprised that they have kept you on," said Eileen in a low voice as soon as they had ordered. "I would have thought that you would be kicked out immediately there was a hint of trouble? How are you finding it?" Sandra looked away, out into the street, a grave expression on her face.

"That isn't what you want to talk about, is it?" she said slowly.

"No, but how are you getting along? Isn't it difficult?"

"It is in some ways. I told my boss, who is also a civilian, that if they dismissed me or if I left it would look as if either they, or I, thought my family were guilty. I said people were supposed to be thought of as innocent until proven guilty."

"Not with conspiracy charges, they aren't."

"I didn't go into such niceties," said Sandra, coldly, adjusting the position of the cutlery. "My boss seems to think that it is all right for me to stay there for the present, just so long as I have no access to the papers, but I don't think it is that simple. I think DS Oxer has had a hand in it."

"In you being kept on?" hissed Eileen, watching a tray being delivered to a near side table. "Why would he do that? Has he been bothering you again?"

"No. I have hardly seen either him or Ken. Perhaps Oxer thinks that if I am sacked I might talk about what happened."

"And would you, talk that is?" Sandra's face became even darker.

"No, I most certainly would not," she said, lowering her voice. "I wish I could forget all about it, but I can't. I find I dream about it frequently. I am there, on the cliff, with him, fighting him off, knowing one night I am going to lose. I wake, bathed in sweat, telling myself that it is only a dream, but it seems so real and frightening!"

"You should tell someone about it."

"I couldn't, and I don't want to talk about it, not now, not ever!"

"Mr Arrowsmythe wants to talk to you," said Eileen softly.

"I know. He has interviewed you?"

"Yes, and I must say he seems a quite pleasant man, but he has, as I said, these striking blue eyes which seem to look right through you. When he looks at you, you feel that you should tell him everything, hold nothing back. You know what I mean?"

"You have seen him?"

"This morning."

"So that is why you have called me and asked me here? And I thought it was just for a chat. You have talked to him? Oh, Eileen, you have told him, haven't you? Oh, how could you, after you promised me that you wouldn't tell anyone? You promised; you did!" Tears started to flow as Eileen waved her hand in an attempt to abate them. She looked around anxiously but no-one yet appeared to have noticed that Sandra was sobbing.

"I have not told him anything, Sandra," she hissed, leaning forward across the table. "Nothing at all. He hasn't the slightest inkling of what happened to you, and I have no intention of telling him unless you tell him first."

"I won't do that," sniffed Sandra.

"But he is suspicious. He appears to have worked out that I knew something before the raid, and has deduced that I could only have found it out from you."

"Oh dear, oh dear," sobbed Sandra. "This is terrible! Whatever will they think of me when they find out that I knew and said nothing; that I didn't warn them?"

"We are in the same boat, Sandra. I knew as well!"

"But I knew first."

“Do you think that you could go into court and deny what happened, or that you knew?”

“Go into court,” wailed Sandra in a low moan. “Me, in court? Why would I have to go to court? What has it got to do with me? I had no involvement in the running of the business so I cannot see how the police would want me to testify. Is he suggesting that I testify on behalf of the family? What would I say?” Eileen was growing alarmed by the panic that was gripping her sister-in-law.

“I wasn’t suggesting that you would be required to go onto the witness stand, but if you were and were under oath, what would you say, because I shall also be on the stand, under oath, and asked these questions. Could you deny it all? If you could not, how could you expect me to?”

“That is not fair!” Sandra exclaimed, wiping her face. “And surely it will not come to that. Anyway, I couldn’t get up in front of the court, in front of a load of men and women and reporters, and describe the awful thing he attempted to do and the things he said. I would rather die first!”

“You don’t mean that, Sandra.”

“I do,” she said petulantly. “And it would only be my word against his. You told me that. After all, there were no witnesses other than the seagulls.”

“But if you were to tell Mr Arrowsmythe the whole story?”

“I cannot, Eileen! Really, I cannot! And if he is as persuasive as you make out, I had better not see him. No-one can make me talk to him, can they?”

“Sandra, you must! You must talk to him. You may be withholding vital evidence.”

“What happened to me had nothing to do with the police investigation or the case against the family. I am not going to be dragged into it. I should never have told you what happened, I see that now.”

“Sandra! Will you at least think about it? Mr Arrowsmythe made a special point of asking me to talk to you. What you know may be very important.”

“So you have told him that there is something?” said Sandra, sharply. “Thank you very much! I do not want to think about it, and I do not want to talk about it any further,” she added with determination, getting to her feet and leaving Eileen sat at the table, watching her go, and having to eat her lunch alone.

“Your father is talking of going back to work and I cannot get him to listen to sense. Would you talk to him, Richard?” implored Mrs Brown. “He’s up with the trains. I can talk to Eileen whilst you are up there.”

“I am not sure that he will pay much attention to me. Anyway, I would have thought that being back at work will be less stressful than sitting around, doing nothing, but worrying about everything. But I will go and talk to him.”

“Thank you, Richard,” said his mother. He just caught the beginning of a question about his sister as he closed the door.

“I really do not know what is going on,” he told his father.

“How’s that?”

“I am have been instructed to come and talk to you. In addition I feel that I am not being told everything. I think I was only sent up here because Mother wants to quiz Eileen about Sandra.”

“Why should she do that?”

“I think there’s something going on between Eileen and Sandra.”

“Going on?” said his father. “Going on in what way?”

“I don’t know,” said Richard, desperately. “Eileen denies it when I ask her. Sandra says that she doesn’t know what I am talking about, but the way she says it tells me there is something. And I am not the only one who thinks it. I think Mr Arrowsmythe suspects the same thing. You know he has seen Sandra?”

“Why shouldn’t he?”

“Why should he? How is Sandra involved in all this?” Mr Brown left the controller and crossed to where his son was standing.

"I don't know what you have in mind. I expect Mr Arrowsmythe simply wanted to get some background information. That's all." Richard shook his head. "What more could there be?" added his father.

"What about what happened at the dance?"

"How could that be connected?"

"I don't know," said Richard, remembering that he had been sent there on a different mission to the one he was presently pursuing. "But it involved the same policeman who was involved in the raid. And Sandra is employed at the police station. And one of their kind is somewhat sweet upon her."

"You mean this Ken fellow? Surely he's harmless?"

"I would suppose so, but we might have thought that about Miss Logan!"

"Yes," said his father, reflectively. "I was wrong there. I completely misjudged that woman."

"A snake in the bosom, that's how Mother described her."

"Well, our eminent counsel would not be asking Sandra about Miss Logan, for sure. Perhaps he is just trying to understand the relationships involved?"

"No. There must be more. Eileen went straight to meet Sandra after her interview with Mr Arrowsmythe. They had lunch together. I know because she was talking about what she would order, and I was left to get my own. When I asked if I could tag along she would not hear of it. And when she came back she was not in a very good humour. She is changing again, and not for the better."

"Eileen?"

"Yes, Eileen," said Richard, gloomily.

"It is this business. It is enough to change anyone. And you have to remember she has the prospect of the operation hanging over her head as well. It is no fun being in hospital, I can tell you."

"You may be right, but she seemed to relax after she received the news and about the time of the dance she was a different woman. Now she seems to be slipping back. I do not know what to do." He did not go on to tell his father that Eileen had presented herself to him in an entirely new light, anymore than he would admit to her, or to anyone else, that much as he was attracted by it, the narcotic essence of Stephanie had been released into his blood, penetrating every part of his body. No matter how seductive and voluptuous Eileen might appear, he was now addicted and she would never be able to provide an antidote.

"That's unfortunate. Why, your mother and I were only commenting the other day on how much more care she is taking about her appearance. That is not all your mother had to say about Eileen."

"What else had she to say? No, don't tell me. I think I would rather not know."

"Perhaps you are wise," said his father. "It is sometimes better to respond to women on the surface rather than look deeply at their motivation."

"I actually came to talk to you about your coming back to the office. Mother is very concerned about it."

"I know she is, but the doctors stress that it will be all right as long as I don't do anything silly. And it will be better than sitting here, fretting about everything."

"That is what I said," declared Richard.

"Have you been able to get down to Newington?"

"No," said Richard, shaking his head. "I have tried to but every time something has cropped up. I have spoken to the architect a couple of times and he says everything is going smoothly down there, and there is no question of booting us off the job. I am less confident about the conversion contracts. They have suspended the two clerks of works."

"I thought they would have to. I am surprised they haven't arrived at a decision concerning us before now."

"I think it is only your good name and reputation that is keeping us going," said Richard.

"Really?" asked Mr Brown, chuckling. "I didn't know I still had a good name or reputation. That is one thing. And, about Sandra. I will see if I can get to talk to her on her

own this afternoon whilst you mother is busying herself with dinner. Better still, if the two of you stay to dinner, you can keep her occupied whilst I talk to Sandra. How about that?"

"It sounds like a good idea to me," said Richard.

"Don't go. I want to talk to you, Sandra," Mr Brown said as soon as they were left alone in the lounge that evening. It was not exactly what Sandra wanted to hear. Everyone seemed intent on talking to her.

"I suppose you are going to lecture me?" she said.

"No? Why would you suggest that?"

"Well, everyone else is and I imagine that they have recruited you to join their little game. It is beginning to make me feel like an outcast, it really is!"

"Sit down, dear. Now when have I lectured you?"

"Quite often, Father."

"Well, I am not going to lecture you now. Nothing could be further from my mind, but now you have mentioned it, why do you think that everyone - whoever they are - are lecturing you? Have you been doing something you shouldn't?" Sandra shook her head and looked away. She did not reply. "There's clearly something," he said, going over and sitting beside her. "I know my little baby too well for her to hide anything from me. There is something wrong, isn't there?" Her handkerchief was out of her handbag as she started to sob.

"There is something," she whispered. "Something that I cannot talk about."

"Not even to me?"

"No."

"Fine, fine," he said, taking her hand. "That's your choice. Your mother and I brought you up with the freedom to take these kind of decisions. Whatever it is that has happened, you must decide whether to tell anyone and when, but you must always be conscious of the needs of others when you consider your choice. You should not be thinking of keeping silent if someone else is going to suffer as a result. Now, I don't want you to tell me anything that you do not want to, but has it, this thing, anything to do with this business with the police?"

"It's no good, Father! It's no good! I can't tell anyone, least of all you. Oh, I feel so wretched. I sometimes wish I could simply die and escape all this!" Mr Brown sat and studied his daughter for a while as she convulsed.

"I really do not know what to say, Sandra. I have never seen you so distraught as you are now. Look, dry those eyes - your mother might come in and she would wonder what on earth has been going on. I do have a reputation for being crotchety and I don't want to add to it. I think that is why they gave me so many drugs. I promise I won't ask you any further questions."

"You mean mother didn't put you up to this?!" sobbed his daughter. "She doesn't know?"

"She doesn't know that I am talking to you. She knows there is something wrong."

"Oh!" said Sandra, and only cried all the more. Mr Brown did not know what to do to pacify his daughter and simply patted her on the knee, stood up, and left the room.

He felt bound to tell his wife later that evening as they were preparing for bed. "I was really surprised, Moira. She just broke down in tears almost before I had said anything," he said.

"I knew there was something!" said his wife. "You don't think she's in trouble?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"That kind of trouble!"

"Our little Sandra? No, I don't. It is something else, but I have no idea what. I have always thought of her as being almost ice cool, devoid of demonstrations of emotion. I mean she hardly blinked an eyelid when that young man she liked died, but here she is, tears pouring forth. I have never seen her like that. I wonder what it means."

"She probably needs a good talking to, except I cannot say a thing to her! I am almost afraid to ask her to do anything as she is liable to snap my head off."

"Richard thinks it has something to do with Eileen."

"Eileen? What on earth could it be that has something to do with Eileen? Why they

see so little of each other. You couldn't exactly describe them as close.”

“They did have lunch together,” said Mr Brown emphatically.

“Did they? And do you remember that Sandra suddenly went there to dinner one afternoon just before the police raid? In fact I think it was on the very eve of the raid, now I think about it. She came home late and went straight up to her room. Don't you remember me saying how odd it was at the time?”

“Not really,” he said, sounding disappointed.

“So perhaps there is something going on between the two of them? And Richard?”

“No, not Richard. He doesn't know what it is. But what kind of thing could it be?”

“I don't know,” said Mrs Brown, feeling frustrated. “Eileen can be a little strange; you have to admit that. She is not at all like that other girl Richard brought home.”

“You mean Stephanie?”

“Trust you not to forget her name. She was very nice.”

“Maybe, but he is married to Eileen and she has quite a lot on her plate at the moment and well as having suffered a great deal of misfortune in her life. That must leave its mark on someone that young. You don't expect to face those kinds of problems until fairly late in your life by which time you have learnt how to dealing with them. Just think how fortunate we have been. Two fine young children and barely a problem, until now. We really are not in a proper position to judge her.”

“I suppose you are right,” she said grudgingly.

“Are you actually agreeing with me for once, Moira?”

“The doctors say that I have to, more often. It will be me who is stressed in future, not you. But about Sandra?”

“I would suggest that we do not worry,” he said. “I know, that sounds fine coming from me, but she is a sensible young woman. I do not think she would act this way unless she had a compelling reason. Whatever the problem is, she will talk about it when she is ready to. Until then we will just have to be patient.”

“And keep calm,” said his wife.